

Alumni Profile

Donovan Sherman – Drama and Theatre PhD Program



Career

Please provide a brief overview of your career path since graduating from UCI.

I applied to a wide swath of academic jobs, in both English and Drama/Theatre, my final year at UCI. Seton Hall University offered me a tenure-track position, which I accepted and began fall 2011. I was awarded tenure at Seton Hall in fall 2017.

What made you get into the career that you are in?

The PhD program in Drama at UCI, coupled with the critical theory emphasis and audited classes in English, kindled a passion for interdisciplinary work. My scholarly focus on Renaissance theatre allows me to explore many different areas of study, from history to theory to theology to philosophy to performance and more.

What do you see yourself doing in five or ten years?

I see myself promoted to full professor, with a broader, more international scope to my work. In addition, I see myself taking on more mentorship positions, in professional and university service and in editorial work.

How do you hope to make a difference?

Teaching the humanities, and protecting the humanities from budget cuts and more abstract attacks on its reputation, is more vital than ever. Outside of the classroom, my academic collaborations must always have value to our public life—they can never solely be self-serving pursuits. I aim to cultivate work that celebrates classical ideals, such as the pursuit of the good life, a deep attentiveness to texts, and an understanding of history, while tempering those universal qualities with an acknowledgment of our duty to combat injustices and attacks on civility in the present day.

Your Time at UCI

When did you attend UCI?

2006-2011.

What program were you in?

The Joint Program in Drama and Theatre, along with the critical theory emphasis.

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

Its academic excellence and reputation for theoretical sophistication, and more immediately the impression I had during my visit that the faculty truly invested time and commitment with their students.

Reflections

What made you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

I was a performer and theatre-maker before I turned to graduate school. While I loved the thrill of performance I always found myself more compelled by the discussions and questions that performance sparked. So I drifted naturally toward work that thought deeply about the theatre, rather than practiced it.

What is your most memorable moment/experience at UCI?

I'm afraid I have to cheat because there are so many! Many revolve around the incredible mentors I had while a student at UCI: meeting and beginning a writing collaboration with the peerless Robert Cohen, in the drama department; attending the vibrant series of scholarly talks arranged by Julia Lupton, in English; co-organizing the Group for Early Cultures graduate conference; countless laughs and epiphanies with my advisor, Bryan Reynolds, along with the other stellar drama faculty members...and of course finishing my dissertation defense and breathing the deepest sigh of relief I have ever breathed.

Was there one thing or one person at UCI that really helped or made a difference in your graduate/postdoctoral career? If so, tell us about whomever or what it was?

I realize I already answered this question in the previous one, but I want to take this opportunity to lift up, once more, Julia Lupton—as generous and brilliant a mentor I could ever ask for, then and now.

Did you do any research while at UCI and what was it?

Yes! My dissertation focused on how the figure of the soul in the Renaissance was realized in the theatre, particularly in the work of Shakespeare.

- How would you explain your research to your grandparent? How would you help someone understand the importance/significance of this research?

In Renaissance England, people commonly professed a belief in having a divine soul. But this soul wasn't something you could access through the senses. So you knew you had a soul, and you knew it would continue on somewhere when you died, but you

couldn't prove that it existed. The soul was both human (it is the realization of your truest self) and alien (it couldn't be understood or acknowledged). Shakespeare's theatre gives us a way to think about this problem.

This is important because, first of all, it reminds us that in different eras, the very idea of the 'human' changed. But it also resonates with ways that we think of ourselves today as multiple: we have online versions of ourselves, avatars, that act as 'souls' of sorts. The work also hopefully lets us view Shakespeare's work differently: as something that gives us access to a spiritual or transcendental power without ever directly conjuring it, much as people in the Renaissance thought of their souls.

- What has impressed you most about the subject matter that you chose for your research/degree while at UCI?

How many different disciplines it touches on! I have had fascinating and rewarding discussions with literary scholars, performers, directors, theologians, philosophers, media theorists, and historians as a result.

Alumni Life

What are you currently up to?

I am an associate professor of English at Seton Hall University.

How did your education at UCI benefit you in your current life?

In countless ways! I aim to emulate my own mentors in my own teaching and advisement; I have had many doors open as a result of my work at UCI; and in a very straightforward way, my dissertation served as a the basis of my first book.

What book or podcast would you suggest to someone who is just getting started with their graduate career at UCI? (Examples – Podcast: *Happier with Gretchen Rubin*; Book: *Who Moved my Cheese*)

*It's probably quite dated in some respects, but I found the book *Getting What You Came For* by Robert Peters very helpful.*

What book or podcast would you suggest to someone who has just graduated and is transitioning to the working world? (Examples – *The First 90 Days*)

What advice do you have for a new graduate student?

Say yes to everything; admit not knowing what you don't know.

What advice would you give to a current graduate student as they look towards their future careers?

Learn to manage your time: this is something no one really teaches directly, but the sooner you can find some 'sacred writing time' every day, in which no one will interrupt you, the better.

At the same time, learn to use every tiny nugget of time you have: waiting at the dentist's office, at the airport gate, in a 15-minute gap between obligations. It adds up!

What was your biggest obstacle transitioning from life of a graduate student to your career?

Learning that it was OK to ask my colleagues questions that seemed reductive or (it felt) to which I should already know the answer.

What is the most unexpected life lesson that you gained from your time at UCI?

I ran a marathon my final year of grad school. I needed structure to my time when I was finishing my dissertation—I was terrified of entire days of unscheduled time. But the Southern Californian weather is perfect for exercise and having a clear pattern of training out helped me carve up that time and give me decidedly non-cerebral goals.

What are your hobbies/passions outside of your work/research?

I have two small children, so they tend to eat up all my time! But I also love running, birding and nature walks, reading non-Renaissance books, going to the theatre, and cooking.

How do you balance work/life?

This could be an entirely separate questionnaire! I would simply say: make the most of those slices of time that are your own. It's easy to get paralyzed and have an hour go by as you fret about what to do next. Instead, choose something and commit to it; don't worry if it was the absolute best thing you could do in that free moment of time.